

Unemployment Insurance Act

West because I believe this clause should be deleted in its entirety.

Mr. Chas. L. Caccia (Davenport): Mr. Speaker, my contribution will be brief. The point has been made by other participants in this debate, but I should like to say a few words on how this issue strikes me in theory and in practice. With other members of the House, I have given a considerable amount of thought to the merits and disadvantages of this measure. I clearly understand the motive and the reasons of the minister and the commission in proposing the measure. Evidently it has the great advantage that it cuts down on all sorts of administrative control: you decide that any Canadian in the labour force above this age will no longer be a participant in the program, and therefore he or she is no longer the object of intensified administrative control. From the point of view of practical administration, therefore, and from the point of view of saving money on the program, this would appeal to anyone concerned with the difficulties of administration.

On the other hand, if one looks at the total issue and tries to avoid being drawn into rhetoric on the whole subject, it does not seem proper to exclude from the right to participate in this program anyone who wishes to be in the labour force, whether they be young or old. It seems to me that the way to make sure no one abuses this particular measure is to apply the same controls that we apply daily to everybody who has to turn to the Unemployment Insurance Commission for service because of reasons beyond their control. We all know this is done very effectively in the field every day, every week and every month of the year. If it can be done for people below the age of 65, surely it can be done for people over the age of 65.

Mr. Alexander: Right.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Hear, hear!

Mr. Caccia: There are people of this age still with family commitments because they started a family late in life. In addition, we have people who have assumed family responsibilities because of the sudden inability of parents to take care of their children and this falls to the lot of the grandparents. Then we have immigrants who work in this country and have not reached the residence requirement of ten years needed to qualify for the old age pension at age 65. A variety of persons in the age group over 65 are bona fide workers with attachment to the labour force, and they ought not to be disqualified from this universal right of contributing to and drawing from this general fund.

Therefore, it seems to me that if the administrator feels there is an abuse in this particular area—and the hearings in committee and the speeches made so far do not seem to indicate that this particular group abuses the scheme more than any other large group—this kind of screening and control would best be carried out by the commission itself. The liberal approach to this question would be that we do not look at the age or sex of the person, or any other consideration of that kind. We only look at the willingness of the person remaining in the work force and seeking an alternative job when the opportunity arises.

[Mr. Patterson.]

● (1610)

It does not disturb me that if a person in this age group, having worked for 40 years and having contributed for a long time, is allowed under the law to draw benefits for up to 52 weeks. Actually, this kind of consideration, retribution or a lengthy period of benefit-drawing, is an indicator to us as to the kind of program we should have. We should have a program of rewarding people in the labour force, one that would allow them to draw from the fund in proportion to the number of months, years or decades of contributions they have put into it. This seems to be the notion that you pick up when you speak to the workers.

If a person has paid into the fund for 31 years, he does not understand why he should not be able to draw a considerable amount from it. He wants to know why a person who has contributed for only eight weeks can draw almost as much from the fund as him if he becomes unemployed. It is perceived in the field by those for whom the scheme has been designed as a measure that is not quite fair. Those aged 65 or over could draw for up to 52 weeks if they were so entitled and if no alternative job could be found, provided search for a job has been demonstrated by the action of the claimant. I would have no objection to that at all. However, I do see the merit in tightening up the administration to ensure that those not legitimately searching for a job but just trying to beat the system would not be allowed to do that.

The legislative route with a legislative measure of this kind draws a very deep line between those below age 65 and those above it. It should, instead, be approached through a kind of administrative measure as we find it possible in the daily operation of the commission for people who are below that age.

Mr. Andy Hogan (Cape Breton-East Richmond): Mr. Speaker, I rise to make a few comments on this clause. Everyone, of course, is for those who are 65 years of age. According to what the minister told us in committee, last year there were 17,500 in this group who were drawing benefits. According to labour force statistics, the average number of unemployed was 7,000. It is hard to believe that this government can be so hard up at this time in Canadian history. They have been preaching the just society and talking about being compassionate Liberals, yet they pick on those in this country who are over 65, completely wiping them out of the unemployment insurance plan.

How much money would it involve? The Canadian Council on Social Development—this was referred to by the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles)—made a study of those over 65 years of age. I am sure members opposite know they found that one-half of those people were living in poverty. Not only do we have a regressive tax system from which to fund this unemployment insurance plan, but we are “doing in” those over age 65, so much so that Mr. Baetz, executive director of the Canadian Council on Social Development, said:

—I have a good deal of heartburn over removing the age 65 and over from coverage. We all know that many of this group have effectively retired, the majority of them, it might be stressed, compulsorily, not necessarily of their own volition. We are also aware that some employers, in collusion with aging employees, have violated the spirit of unemployment insurance. Nevertheless, we must seriously ask whether